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A strong plea for an unfinished treaty

TO MANY citizens, it must seem as though the debate over ratification of a new Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty (SALT II) has already gone on for years.

Both proponents and opponents of ratification have brought up so much heavy artillery that one would think the Senate was about to stage the showdown vote.

The fact is, of course, that treaty negotiations with the Russians are still unsettled. The issue is not before the Senate — and may not for some weeks. There may be no ratification vote until 1980.

Yet, in his address to the American Newspaper Publishers Association in New York yesterday, President Carter gave what White House officials described as the definitive speech on SALT II. "Selling SALT" has as high a priority as anything on the administration's agenda.

Mr. Carter declared flatly that the United States will be able to tell if the Russians are cheating on a new treaty from the moment it signed.

No one doubts the President's sincerity. Yet in the highly technical area of weapons intelligence, he is dependent like the rest of us on the opinions of experts who do not always agree.

Adm. Stansfield Turner, director of the Central Intelligence Agency, told a closed-door Senate Intelligence Committee hearing the other day that it would take three to four years to regain the intelligence capabilities that were lost when Iran closed two U.S. monitoring stations with a "front-row seat" on the principal Soviet missile-testing area.

Later, White House Press Secretary Jody Powell said

Turner also made clear that



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enough capability will be restored within a year to verify SALT compliance by the Soviet Union.

The net effect of Turner's testimony, though, was to increase congressional and public concern over the verification question.

Mr. Carter made a strong and moving plea for SALT II support, noting that "SALT is at the heart" of efforts to manage a stable East-West relationship.

That may well be true. Yet a new pact must be weighed on its own merits and not simply as a possible tool for improving East-West relations.

The nation is faced, said Mr. Carter, with the choice of a possibly imperfect treaty or "a dark nightmare of unrestrained arms competition."

Again, he is probably right. But the presidential oratory should not serve to shut off debate or relieve the Senate of its duty to subject the treaty to a cold, independent and thorough evaluation.

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